

Federal Tax Credits for Historic Preservation

Introduction

The Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentive is described here in general terms only. More detailed information, including copies of application forms, regulations, and other program information, is available on the Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentives website. The Tax Reform Act of 1986, as amended, is complex. Readers should consult an accountant, tax attorney, or other professional tax advisor, legal counsel, or the Internal Revenue Service for help in determining the tax and other financial implications of any matter discussed here.

Department of the Interior regulations governing the procedures for obtaining historic preservation certifications are more fully explained in Title 36 of the Code of Federal Regulations, Part 67. The Internal Revenue Service regulations governing the tax credits for rehabilitation are contained in Treasury Regulation Section 1.48-12. These sets of regulations take precedence in the event of any inconsistency with this publication.

Preservation Tax Incentives

Historic buildings are tangible links with the past. They help give a community a sense of identity, stability and orientation. The Federal government encourages the preservation of historic buildings through various means. One of these is the program of Federal tax incentives to support the rehabilitation of historic and older buildings. The Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentives program is one of the Federal government's most successful and cost-effective community revitalization programs. The Preservation Tax Incentives reward private investment in rehabilitating historic properties such as offices, rental housing, and retail stores.

Since 1976, the National Park Service has administered the program in partnership with the Internal Revenue Service and with State Historic Preservation Officers. The tax incentives have spurred the rehabilitation of historic structures of every period, size, style and type. They have been instrumental in preserving the historic places that give cities, towns and rural areas their special character. The tax incentives for preservation attract new private investment to the historic cores of cities and towns. They also generate jobs, enhance property values, and augment revenues for State and local governments through increased property, business and income taxes. The Preservation Tax Incentives also help create moderate and low-income housing in historic buildings. Through this program, abandoned or under used schools, warehouses, factories, churches, retail stores, apartments, hotels, houses, and offices throughout the country have been restored to life in a manner that maintains their historic character. Current tax incentives for preservation, established by the Tax Reform Act of 1986 (PL 99-514; Internal Revenue Code Section 47 [formerly Section 48(g)]) include:

- 20% tax credit for the certified rehabilitation of certified historic structures.
- a 10% tax credit for the rehabilitation of non-historic, non-residential buildings built before 1936.

For both credits, the rehabilitation must be a substantial one and must involve a depreciable building. (These terms will be explained later.)

What Is a Tax Credit?

A tax credit differs from an income tax deduction. An income tax deduction lowers the amount of income subject to taxation. A tax credit, however, lowers the amount of tax owed. In general, a dollar of tax credit reduces the amount of income tax owed by one dollar.

- The 20% rehabilitation tax credit equals 20% of the amount spent in a certified rehabilitation of a certified historic structure.
- The 10% rehabilitation tax credit equals 10% of the amount spent to rehabilitate a non-historic building built before 1936.

20% Rehabilitation Tax Credit

The Federal historic preservation tax incentives program (the 20% credit) is jointly administered by the U.S. Department of the Interior and the Department of the Treasury. The National Park Service (NPS) acts on behalf of the Secretary of the Interior, in partnership with the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) in each State. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) acts on behalf of the Secretary of the Treasury. Certification requests (requests for approval for a taxpayer to receive these benefits) are made to the National Park Service through the appropriate State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO). Comments by the SHPO on certification requests are fully considered by the NPS. However, approval of projects undertaken for the 20% tax credit is conveyed only in writing by duly authorized officials of the National Park Service. For a description of the roles of the NPS, the IRS and the SHPO, see “Tax Credits: Who Does What?”

The 20% rehabilitation tax credit applies to any project that the Secretary of the Interior designates a certified rehabilitation of a certified historic structure. The 20% credit is available for properties rehabilitated for commercial, industrial, agricultural, or rental residential purposes, but it is not available for properties used exclusively as the owner’s private residence.

What is a “certified historic structure?”

A certified historic structure is a building that is listed individually in the National Register of Historic Places —OR— a building that is located in a registered historic district and certified by the National Park Service as contributing to the historic significance of that district. The “structure” must be a building—not a bridge, ship, railroad car, or dam. (A registered historic district is any district listed in the National Register of Historic Places. A State or local historic district may also qualify as a registered historic district if the district and the enabling statute are certified by the Secretary of the Interior.)

Obtaining Certified Historic Structure Status

Owners of buildings within historic districts must complete Part 1 of the Historic Preservation Certification Application—Evaluation of Significance. The owner submits this application to the SHPO. The SHPO reviews the application and forwards it to the NPS with a recommendation for approving or denying the request. The NPS then determines whether the building contributes to the historic district. If so, the building then becomes a “certified historic structure.” The NPS bases its decision on the Secretary of the Interior’s “Standards for Evaluating Significance within Registered Historic Districts.”

Buildings individually listed in the National Register of Historic Places are already certified historic structures. Owners of these buildings need not complete the Part 1 application.

Property owners unsure if their building is listed in the National Register or if it is located in a National Register or certified State or local historic district should contact their SHPO.

What if my building is not yet listed in the National Register?

Owners of buildings that are not yet listed individually in the National Register of Historic Places or located in districts that are not yet registered historic districts may use the Historic Preservation Certification Application, Part 1, to request a preliminary determination of significance from the National Park Service. Such a determination may also be obtained for a building located in a registered historic district but that is outside the period or area of significance of the district. A preliminary determination of significance allows the owner to proceed with the rehabilitation project while the process of nominating a building or a district continues. Preliminary determinations, however, are not binding. They become final only when the building or the historic district is listed in the National Register or when the district documentation is amended to include additional periods of areas of significance.

What is a “certified rehabilitation?”

The National Park Service must approve, or “certify,” all rehabilitation projects seeking the 20% rehabilitation tax credit. A certified rehabilitation is a rehabilitation of a certified historic structure that is approved by the NPS as being consistent with the historic character of the property and, where applicable, the district in which it is located. The NPS assumes that some alteration of the historic building will occur to provide for an efficient use. However, the project must not damage, destroy, or cover materials or features, whether interior or exterior, that help define the building’s historic character.

Application Process

Owners seeking certification of rehabilitation work must complete Part 2 of the Historic Preservation Certification Application—Description of Rehabilitation. Long-term lessees may also apply if their lease is 27.5 years for residential property or 39 years for nonresidential property. The owner submits the application to the SHPO. The SHPO provides technical assistance and literature on appropriate rehabilitation treatments, advises owners on their applications, makes site visits when possible, and forwards the application to the NPS, with a recommendation.

The NPS reviews the rehabilitation project for conformance with the “Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation,” and issues a certification decision. The entire project is reviewed, including related demolition and new construction, and is certified, or approved, only if the overall rehabilitation project meets the Standards. Both the NPS and the IRS strongly encourage owners to apply before they start work.

After the rehabilitation work is completed, the owner submits Part 3 of the Historic Preservation Certification Application—Request for Certification of Completed Work to the SHPO. The SHPO forwards the application to the NPS, with a recommendation as to certification. The NPS then evaluates the completed project against the work proposed in the Part 2—Description of Rehabilitation. Only completed projects that meet the Standards for Rehabilitation are approved as “certified rehabilitations” for purposes of the 20% rehabilitation tax credit.

Processing Fees

The NPS charges a fee for reviewing applications, except where the total rehabilitation cost is under \$20,000. Fees are charged according to a two-tiered system: a preliminary fee and a final fee. The preliminary fee is \$250. It covers NPS review of proposed rehabilitation work. The final fee covers NPS review of completed projects. The final fee amount depends on the cost of the rehabilitation, according to the fee schedule below. The preliminary fee is deducted from the final fee. Payment should not be sent until requested by the NPS. The NPS will not issue a certification decision until payment has been received.

Fee	Cost of Rehabilitation
\$500	\$20,000 to \$99,999
\$800	\$100,000 to \$499,999
\$1,500	\$500,000 to \$999,999
\$2,500	\$1,000,000 or more

IRS Requirements

To be eligible for the 20% rehabilitation tax credit, a project must also meet the following basic tax requirements of the Internal Revenue Code:

- The building must be depreciable. That is, it must be used in a trade or business or held for the production of income. It may be used for offices, for commercial, industrial or agricultural enterprises, or for rental housing. It may not serve exclusively as the owner’s private residence.
- The rehabilitation must be substantial. That is, during a 24-month period selected by the taxpayer, rehabilitation expenditures must exceed the greater of \$5,000 or the adjusted basis of the building and its structural components. The adjusted basis is generally the purchase price, minus the cost of land, plus improvements already made, minus depreciation already taken. Once the substantial rehabilitation test is met, all qualified expenditures, including those incurred outside of the measuring period, qualify for the credit.
- If the rehabilitation is completed in phases, the same rules apply, except that a 60-month measuring period applies. This phase rule is available only if: (1) there is a set of architectural plans and specifications for all phases of the rehabilitation, and (2) it can reasonably be expected that all phases of the rehabilitation will be completed.

- The property must be placed in service (that is, returned to use). The rehabilitation tax credit is generally allowed in the taxable year the rehabilitated property is placed in service.
- The building must be a certified historic structure when it is placed in service; if it is not yet a certified historic structure when it is placed in service, the owner must have requested on or before the date that the building was placed in service a determination from the NPS that the building is a certified historic structure, and have a reasonable expectation that the determination will be granted. (This means, generally, for buildings not individually listed in the National Register of Historic Places, that Part 1 of the Historic Preservation Certification Application must have been filed before the building was placed in service.)
- Qualified rehabilitation expenditures include costs associated with the work undertaken on the historic building, as well as architectural and engineering fees, site survey fees, legal expenses, development fees, and other construction-related costs, if such costs are added to the basis of the property and are determined to be reasonable and related to the services performed. They do not include costs of acquiring or furnishing the building, new additions that expand the existing building, new building construction, or parking lots, sidewalks, landscaping, or other facilities related to the building.

Getting your project approved, or “certified”

Tens of thousands of projects have been approved for the historic preservation tax credit. Observing the following points will make approval of your project easier:

- Apply as soon as possible—preferably before beginning work. Consult with the SHPO as soon as you can. Read carefully the program application, regulations, and any other information the SHPO supplies. Submit your application early in the project planning. Wait until the project is approved in writing by the NPS before beginning work. Work undertaken prior to approval by the NPS may jeopardize certification. In the case of properties not yet designated certified historic structures, apply before the work is completed and the building placed in service.
- Photograph the building inside and outside—before and after the project. “Before” photographs are especially important. Without them, it may be impossible for the NPS to approve a project.
- Read and follow the “Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation” and the “Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings.” If you are unsure how they apply to your building, consult with the SHPO or the NPS.
- Once you have applied, alert the SHPO and the NPS to any changes in the project.

Claiming the 20% Rehabilitation Tax Credit

Generally, the tax credit is claimed on IRS form 3468 for the tax year in which the rehabilitated building is placed in service. For phased projects, the tax credit may be claimed before completion of the entire project provided that the substantial rehabilitation test has been met. If a building remains in service throughout the rehabilitation, then the credit may be claimed when the substantial rehabilitation test has been met.

The IRS requires that the NPS certification of completed work (Application Part 3) be filed with the tax return claiming the tax credit. If final certification has not yet been received when the taxpayer files the tax return claiming the credit, a copy of the first page of the Historic Preservation Certification Application—Part 2 must be filed with the tax return. The copy of the application filed must show evidence that it has been received by either the SHPO or the NPS (date-stamped receipt or other notice is sufficient). If the taxpayer then fails to receive final certification within 30 months after claiming the credit, the taxpayer must agree to extend the period of assessment. If the NPS denies certification to a rehabilitation project, the credit will be disallowed.

Recapture of the Credit

The owner must hold the building for five full years after completing the rehabilitation, or pay back the credit. If the owner disposes of the building within a year after it is placed in service, 100% of the credit is recaptured. For properties held between one and five years, the tax credit recapture amount is reduced by 20% per year.

The NPS or the SHPO may inspect a rehabilitated property at any time during the five-year period. The NPS may revoke certification if work was not done as described in the Historic Preservation Certification Application, or if unapproved alterations were made for up to five years after certification of the rehabilitation. The NPS will notify the IRS of such revocations.

Depreciation

Rehabilitated property is depreciated using the straight-line method over 27.5 years for residential property and over 39 years for nonresidential property. The depreciable basis of the rehabilitated building must be reduced by the full amount of the tax credit claimed.

Rehabilitation Tax Credits: Who Does What?

The Federal historic preservation tax incentives program is a partnership among the National Park Service (NPS), the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). Each plays an important role.

State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO)

- Serves as first point of contact for property owners.
- Provides application forms, regulations, and other program information.
- Maintains complete records of the State's buildings and districts listed in the National Register of Historic Places, as well as State and local districts that may qualify as registered historic districts.
- Assists anyone wishing to list a building or a district in the National Register of Historic Places.
- Provides technical assistance and literature on appropriate rehabilitation treatments.
- Advises owners on their applications and makes site visits on occasion to assist owners.
- Makes certification recommendations to the NPS.

National Park Service (NPS)

- Reviews all applications for conformance to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.
- Issues all certification decisions (approvals or denials) in writing.
- Transmits copies of all decisions to the IRS.
- Develops and publishes program regulations, the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, the Historic Preservation Certification Application, and information on rehabilitation treatments.

Internal Revenue Service (IRS)

- Publishes regulations governing which rehabilitation expenses qualify, the time periods for incurring expenses, the tax consequences of certification decisions by NPS, and all other procedural and legal matters concerning both the 20% and the 10% rehabilitation tax credits.
- Answers public inquiries concerning legal and financial aspects of the Rehabilitation Tax Credit program, and publishes the audit guide, Market Segment Specialization Program: Rehabilitation Tax Credit, to assist owners.
- Insures that only parties eligible for the rehabilitation tax credits utilize them.

10% Rehabilitation Tax Credit

The 10% rehabilitation tax credit is available for the rehabilitation of non-historic buildings built before 1936.

As with the 20% rehabilitation tax credit, the 10% credit applies only to buildings—not to ships, bridges or other structures. The rehabilitation must be substantial, exceeding either \$5,000 or the adjusted basis of the property, whichever is greater. And the property must be depreciable.

The 10% credit applies only to buildings rehabilitated for non-residential uses. Rental housing would thus not qualify. Hotels, however, would qualify. They are considered to be in commercial use, not residential.

A building that has been moved is ineligible for the 10% rehabilitation credit. (A moved certified historic structure, however, can still be eligible for the 20% credit.) Furthermore, projects undertaken for the 10% credit must meet a specific physical test for retention of external walls and internal structural framework:

- at least 50% of the building's walls existing at the time the rehabilitation began must remain in place as external walls at the work's conclusion, and
- at least 75% of the building's existing external walls must remain in place as either external or internal walls, and
- at least 75% of the building's internal structural framework must remain in place.

Claiming the 10% Rehabilitation Tax Credit

The tax credit must be claimed on IRS form 3468 for the tax year in which the rehabilitated building is placed in service. There is no formal review process for rehabilitations of non-historic buildings.

The 10% or 20% Credit: Which One Applies?

The 10% rehabilitation tax credit applies only to non-historic, non-residential buildings built before 1936. The 20% rehabilitation tax credit applies only to certified historic structures, and may include buildings built after 1936. The two credits are mutually exclusive. Only one applies to a given project. Which credit applies depends on the building—not on the owner's preference.

Buildings listed in the National Register of Historic Places are not eligible for the 10% credit. Buildings located in National Register listed historic districts or certified State or local historic districts are presumed to be historic and are therefore not eligible for the 10% credit. Owners of buildings in these historic districts may claim the 10% credit only if they file Part 1 of the Historic Preservation Certification Application with the National Park Service and receive a determination that the building does not contribute to the district and is not a certified historic structure. Owners of historic buildings denied certification for the 20% credit may not claim the 10% credit.

Other Tax Provisions Affecting Use of Preservation Tax Incentives

A number of provisions in the Internal Revenue Code affect the way in which real estate investments are treated generally. These provisions include the alternative minimum tax, the “at-risk” rules, and, most importantly, the passive activity limitation. What these provisions mean, in practice, is that many taxpayers may not be able to use in one year all of the tax credits earned in a certified rehabilitation project.

A brief discussion of these matters follows. Readers should seek professional advice concerning the personal financial implications of these provisions.

Passive Activity Limitation

The passive activity limitation provides that losses and credits from “passive” income sources, such as real estate limited partnerships, cannot be used to offset tax liability from “active” sources such as salaries. This passive activity limitation does not apply to:

- Most regular corporations.
- Real estate professionals who materially participate in a real property trade or business and who satisfy eligibility requirements regarding the proportion and amount of time spent in such businesses.

For other taxpayers, two exceptions apply: a general exception and a specific exception for certified rehabilitations.

General Passive Loss Rules

Taxpayers with incomes less than \$100,000 (generally, adjusted gross income with certain modifications) may take up to \$25,000 in losses annually from rental properties. This \$25,000 annual limit on losses is reduced for individuals with incomes between \$100,000 and \$150,000 and eliminated for individuals with incomes over \$150,000.

Passive Credit Exemption

Individuals, including limited partners, with adjusted gross incomes of less than \$200,000 (and, subject to phase out, up to \$250,000) investing in a rehabilitation credit project may use the tax credit to offset the tax owed on up to \$25,000 of income. Thus, a taxpayer in the 36% tax bracket could use \$9,000 of tax credits per year ($36\% \times \$25,000 = \$9,000$). Unused tax credits may be “carried forward” indefinitely until used up.

This \$25,000 amount is first reduced by losses allowed under the general “passive loss” rule above for taxpayers with incomes less than \$150,000.

At-Risk Rules

Under Internal Revenue Code Section 465, a taxpayer may deduct losses and obtain credits from a real estate investment only to the extent that the taxpayer is “at-risk” for the investment. The amount that a taxpayer is “at-risk” is generally the sum of cash or property contributions to the project plus any borrowed money for which the taxpayer is personally liable, including certain borrowed amounts secured by the property used in the project. In addition, in the case of the activity of holding real property, the amount “at-risk” includes qualified non-recourse financing borrowed from certain financial institutions or government entities.

Alternative Minimum Tax

Taxpayers who are not required to pay tax under the regular tax system may still be liable for tax under the alternative minimum tax laws. Alternative minimum taxable income is computed from regular taxable income with certain adjustments and the addition of all appropriate tax preference items.

Non refundable credits, such as the rehabilitation tax credit, may not be used to reduce the alternative minimum tax. If a taxpayer cannot use the tax credit because of the alternative minimum tax, the credit can be carried back or forward.

Rehabilitations Involving Governments and Other Tax-Exempt Entities

Property used by governmental bodies, nonprofit organizations, or other tax-exempt entities is not eligible for the rehabilitation tax credit if the tax-exempt entity enters into a disqualified lease (as the lessee) for more than 35% of the property. A disqualified lease occurs when:

- Part or all of the property was financed directly or indirectly by an obligation in which the interest is tax-exempt under Internal Revenue Code Section 103(a) and such entity (or related entity) participated in such financing; or,
- Under the lease there is a fixed or determinable price for purchase or an option to buy which involves such entity (or related entity); or,
- The lease term is in excess of 20 years; or,
- The lease occurs after a sale or lease of the property and the lessee used the property before the sale or lease.

Other Tax Incentives for Historic Preservation

Other Federal and State tax incentives exist for historic preservation. They may be combined with the rehabilitation tax credit.

Charitable Contributions for Historic Preservation Purposes

Internal Revenue Code Section 170(h) and Department of the Treasury Regulation Section 1.170A-14 provide for income and estate tax deductions for charitable contributions of partial interests in historic property (principally easements). The Tax Reform Act of 1986 retained these provisions. Generally, the IRS considers that a donation of a qualified real property interest to preserve a historically important land area or a certified historic structure meets the test of a charitable contribution for conservation purposes. For purposes of the charitable contribution provisions only, a certified historic structure need not be depreciable to qualify, may be a structure other than a building and may also be a portion of a building such as a facade, if that is all that remains, and may include the land area on which it is located.

The IRS definition of historically important land areas includes:

- independently significant land areas, including any related historic resources that meet National Register Criteria for Evaluation;
- land areas within registered historic districts, including buildings, that contribute to the significance of the historic district; and,
- land areas adjacent to a property individually listed in the National Register of Historic Places (but not within a historic district) where physical or environmental features of the land area contribute to the historic or cultural integrity of the historic property.

State Tax Incentives

A number of States offer tax incentives for historic preservation. They include tax credits for rehabilitation, tax deductions for easement donations, and property tax abatements or moratoriums. The SHPO will have information on current State programs. Requirements for State incentives may differ from those outlined here.

Investment Tax Credit for Low Income Housing

The Tax Reform Act of 1986 (IRC Section 42) also established an investment tax credit for acquisition, construction, or rehabilitation of low income housing. The credit is approximately 9% per year for 10 years for each unit acquired, constructed, or rehabilitated without other Federal subsidies and approximately 4% for 10 years for units involving the 20% rehabilitation tax credit, Federal subsidies or tax-exempt bonds. Units must meet tests for cost per unit and number of units occupied by individuals with incomes below area median income. The law sets a 15-year compliance period. Credits are allocated by State Housing Credit Agencies.

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Evaluating Significance Within Registered Historic Districts

The following Standards govern whether buildings within a historic district contribute to the significance of the district. Owners of buildings that meet these Standards may apply for the 20% rehabilitation tax credit. Buildings within historic districts that meet these Standards cannot qualify for the 10% credit.

1. A building contributing to the historic significance of a district is one which by location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association adds to the district's sense of time and place and historical development.
2. A building not contributing to the historic significance of a district is one which does not add to the district's sense of time and place and historical development; or one where the location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association have been so altered or have so deteriorated that the overall integrity of the building has been irretrievably lost.
3. Ordinarily buildings that have been built within the past 50 years shall not be considered to contribute to the significance of a district unless a strong justification concerning their historical or architectural merit is given or the historical attributes of the district are considered to be less than 50 years old.

Contact

For more information on tax incentives for historic preservation, contact the NPS, the IRS, or one of the SHPOs listed below. Available information includes:

- A Catalog of NPS publications on appropriate methods to preserve historic buildings. These include Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings, Preservation Briefs, and many others.
- The Historic Preservation Certification Application (a 3-part form: Part 1—Evaluation of Significance; Part 2—Description of Rehabilitation; Part 3—Request for Certification of Completed Work).
- Department of the Interior, National Park Service, regulations on "Historic Preservation Certifications." [36 CFR Part 67].
- Department of the Treasury, Internal Revenue Service, regulations on "Investment Tax Credit for Qualified Rehabilitation Expenditures." [Treasury Regulation Section 1.48-12].
- Market Segment Specialization Program: Rehabilitation Tax Credit (available only from the IRS).

National Park Service and State Historic Preservation Officers

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